

Agon, Conflict and Dissent: Elfriede Jelinek's *Ein Sportstück* and its Stagings by Einar Schleef and Just a Must Theatre

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I.

The frequently cited opening stage directions of Elfriede Jelinek's *Ein Sportstück* [translated as Sports Play] have become paradigmatic for the author's attitude towards the staging of her plays: 'Die Autorin gibt nicht viele Anweisungen, das hat sie inzwischen gelernt. Machen Sie was Sie wollen' ['The author does not give many stage directions, she has learned her lesson by now. Do what you like'].¹ This *carte blanche* instruction and the increasingly open and unconventional form of Jelinek's theatre texts, such as a lack of designated speakers and the use of large blocks of polyphonic monologues, have given directors the freedom to deploy a vast variety of directorial strategies and in the course of so doing to become more like creative co-authors of the material. German *Regietheater* [directors' theatre], which is notorious for its creative and often irreverent treatment of play texts, has taken up the challenge of Jelinek's texts with a vengeance.

By the time she wrote *Ein Sportstück* in 1997, a new generation of directors and dramaturgs such as Jossi Wieler, Thirza Brunken, Frank Castorf and Tilman Raabke had already begun to develop their own directorial, dramaturgical and performative approaches to staging Jelinek's plays. While Jossi Wieler deliberately went against the grain of Jelinek's declared rejection of psychological theatre and came up with a quasi-naturalistic setting and quasi-psychological acting style in his staging of her text montage *Wolken.Heim.* at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg (1993), Frank Carstorf's direction of *Raststätte, oder sie machens alle* [Services, or,

¹ Elfriede Jelinek, *Ein Sportstück* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1998), p. 7; Elfriede Jelinek, *Sports Play*, trans. by Penny Black; with translation assistance and a foreword by Karen Jürs-Munby (London, 2012), p. 39. Subsequent references to the play and its translation are indicated with page numbers in the text. Some passages in this article are based on my foreword to the English translation.

They all do it] at the same theatre (1995) was marked by satirical playfulness, brutal imagery and deliberate lack of respect for the author's public image. The staging became famous for its final stage image of a large, mechanical sex doll, recognisable as a caricature of Jelinek, which mumbled long incomprehensible monologues at the audience. According to Gitta Honegger, 'Jelinek maintains that Castorf's direction, though utterly offensive, was absolutely correct for this play'.²

These kinds of experiences with directors of her plays may explain the above mock-resigned opening stage direction in *Ein Sportstück*. Yet, as Joachim Lux states, this stage direction is 'not a vain pose, nor a contribution to the tedious debate about faithfulness to the text, but a logical consequence of her own aesthetic procedure'.³ Just as she takes on and manipulates quotations from literature, philosophy, popular culture and the media to weave them into a new intertextual web for her own critical purposes, she fully expects directors to do the same when 'translating' her plays into their own theatrical languages. Most of Jelinek's plays since *Ein Sportstück* have contained similar (non-) stage directions that seemingly surrender to but actually implicitly demand the creative freedom of directors, designers and performers. In an interview with Simon Stephens conducted on the occasion of the English-language premiere of *Sports Play* by Just a Must Theatre, Jelinek explains that, while she does have images in her head when she writes plays, '[w]hen a director does something completely different, this interests me all the more. It would [...] be boring for me if the director – and of course also the actors – were simply to stage and illustrate what I prescribe to them'.⁴ That the author thus throws down the gauntlet to directors is incidentally also a key to her success as a playwright: by keeping her distance from the production process and simultaneously daring

² See Gitta Honegger, 'How to get the Nobel prize without really trying', *Theater*, 36.2 (2006), 5-19 (p. 9).

³ Joachim Lux, "'Theaterverweigerer" an der Burg: Schleef – Stemann – Schlingensief – Häusermann", in *Elfriede Jelinek: "ICH WILL KEIN THEATER". Mediale Überschreitungen*, ed. by Pia Janke (Vienna, 2007), pp. 152-171 (p. 158). Unless otherwise noted all translations from German throughout are my own.

⁴ Simon Stephens, 'Elfriede Jelinek: Game on', trans. of Elfriede Jelinek's responses by Karen Jürs-Munby, in *The Stage*, 13 July 2012, available <http://www.thestage.co.uk/people/2012/07/elfriede-jelinek-game-on/> [accessed 10 July 2014].

directors to live up to the challenge of her texts, her plays can proliferate and resonate in different 'arenas' in ever new and unexpected ways.

In this article I look specifically at the late Einar Schleef's radical directorial approach to *Ein Sportstück* in his 1998 production at the Burgtheater, which not only fulfilled but exceeded the one condition Jelinek had attached to her otherwise open stage direction: 'Das einzige was unbedingt sein muß, ist: griechische Chöre, einzelne, Massen' (p. 7) [The only thing that has to be kept are the Greek Choruses, as individual, or en masse, p. 37]. Schleef's approach, which uses choruses in multiple ways and further heightens and expands Jelinek's references to Greek tragedy, will be related to his own theories about the disappearance of the chorus from German theatre and of woman from the centre of the conflict. I will discuss both Jelinek's text and Schleef's production in the wider context of the concept of the *agon* and of the conflict between group/mass and individual. A reworking of *agon* and conflict, I argue, is not only central to Jelinek's text but even more so to Schleef's dramaturgy. In performance, this dramaturgy provides the means for experiencing – in a physically palpable way – the dominance and fascist potential of mass cultural sporting ideologies, the individual's desire to belong to a group, as well as the exclusion and victimisation of individuals and minorities.

Schleef's monumental staging is something of a canonical production and its iconic status has at times deterred other directors from attempting to stage the play. In a concluding part I will reflect on the much more modest English premiere by Just a Must in 2012, a staging I worked on as a dramaturg, and explore how this production resonated differently within the new arena of Britain in the thrall of EURO 2012 and the London Olympics of that year. I will use this as an occasion to consider the potential drawbacks of Schleef's production with respect to cultural translatability despite its undoubted and incomparable achievement.

II.

The concept of the archaic Greek *agon* links a number of spheres that are relevant here and which I argue are all invoked – to a greater or lesser degree – in Jelinek’s play and Schleef’s staging. The concept covers a broad socio-cultural range of practices and values that are nowadays often perceived as belonging to entirely separate ‘arenas’, including those of martial arts – both in sports and in battle – dramatic arts, and judicial and political processes. Thus various meanings of the ancient Greek noun ἀγών are: ‘assembly, in the sense of meeting at the games; place of assembly or contest (including the arena or stadium at the Olympic games); action at a law trial (*agonistes* refers to an advocate); battle; and most generally, struggle or contest in the verbal or physical sense’.⁵ In the latter sense it also refers to a ‘verbal contest or dispute between two characters in a Greek play’,⁶ namely between the ‘protagonist’ and the ‘antagonist’, although the chorus in Greek tragedy as a quintessentially public figure can also play a part in such an *agon*. As such, the *agon* – and tragedy as an agonistic form par excellence – is inherently *political*. As Hans-Thies Lehmann writes, ‘There can be no private tragedy. Where we find the tragic, we hit upon the political’.⁷

The entire spectrum of the above meanings resonates in *Ein Sportstück* with its conflicts of nameless ‘victims’ against ‘perpetrators’, ‘thinkers’ against ‘the masses’, the hybrid figure of Elfi Elektra against society, the Woman who is dispossessed of her son against the Chorus, and the war of the sexes in the scene between Sportsman and Young Woman, which the latter introduces as ‘eine wetteifernd freche Übung, bei der mir die Leute über die Schulter schauen, was ich in mein Heft hinein kritzle’ (p. 104) [‘a cheekily competitive exercise that people can watch by looking over my shoulder and see what I’m sketching in my notebook’, p. 103], that is as a kind of ironic *agon* both on the level of the dialogue and, as becomes

⁵ Janet Lungstrum and Elizabeth Sauer, ‘Creative Agonistics: An Introduction’, in *Agonistics: Arena of Creative Contests*, ed. by Janet Lungstrum and Elizabeth Sauer (New York, 1997), pp. 1-32 (p. 27, note 3). Lungstrum and Sauer cite from Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, abridged edition (Oxford, 1984).

⁶ *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition (Oxford, 1991), p. 29.

⁷ Hans-Thies Lehmann, ‘The Future of Tragedy’, in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*, ed. by Karen Jürs-Munby, Jerome Carroll and Steve Giles (London, 2013), pp. 87-109 (p. 90).

clear, on the level of the author competing with Kleist's *Penthesilea*, one of the scene's intertexts. Yet while the *agon* in ancient Greece was valued positively as a competitive ethos and honour system underpinning the whole society, in Jelinek's *Sportstück* its interconnected spheres are revisited as a critical comment on the experience of the twentieth century. The invocation of classical Greece serves as a foil – often presented with considerable irony and sarcasm – to gauge both historical continuities (for example in terms of patriarchy) and historical distance from Greek ideals (for example in the modern instrumentalisation and commodification of sports).

Finally, however, there is an argument to be made that on the level of communication with the audience Jelinek attempts to revive 'agonistics' as a form of democratic dissent and debate initiated by theatre. The point that the performance of *agon* in Greek tragedy was about exploring dissent and authority is made, for example, by Elton Barker who argues that 'the entire tragic performance represents an investigation into dissent that reproduces multiple viewpoints and transfers the responsibility to manage them onto the audience'.⁸ Jelinek's own direct confrontation of the audience as a public, I will argue, is further heightened by Schlee's use of vehement direct choric address, his preference for the *theatron* axis (the relationship between the actors and the audience) over the dramatic axis (the relationship between the characters in a dialogue), as well as his treatment of the theatre space to change the audience's perception, above all his creation of the theatre as *Hörraum*, a space for listening to marginalised voices that aim to disrupt a politics of consensus.

As Chantal Mouffe has recently reasserted, "cultural and artistic practices can play a critical role by fostering agonistic public spaces where counter-hegemonic struggles could be launched against neo-liberal hegemony".⁹ With respect to Schlee's production, as I aim to

⁸ Elton T. E. Barker, *Entering the Agōn: Dissent and Authority in Homer, Historiography and Tragedy* (Oxford, 2009), p. 275.

⁹ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London, 2013), p. xvii.

show, it can also be argued that the site-specific treatment of the Burgtheater building fostered such an “agonistic public space”. While Just a Must’s production of *Sports Play* engaged less in disrupting public spaces, its public performances in Britain in the context of the London Olympics can nevertheless be seen as an agonistic artistic practice that is critical especially of neo-liberal capitalism.

III.

Although *Ein Sportstück* is by no means Jelinek’s only treatment of sport, it is, on one level, her most systematic treatment of its socio-cultural role within twentieth-century Europe. She is interested in sports and sports spectatorship as a mass phenomenon, especially in the drives and mechanisms that can turn individuals into crowds behaving uniformly and violently, as Elfi Elektra notes in the opening monologue: ‘So viele Menschen mit persönlichen Tatantrieben und plötzlich, als zerschmetterte der Schlag einer unsichtbaren Uhr etwas in ihren Schädeln und stellte sie auf eine imaginäre Zeit ein, ticken sie alle im gleichen Takt, ergreifen ihre Sportgeräte und dreschen aufeinander los’ (p.8) [‘So many people with personal drive. Then all at once, as if the stroke of an invisible clock had smashed something in their skulls and reset them to an imaginary time, they are all ticking to the same beat. They grab their sports equipment and thrash each other’, p. 40]. At the time the play was written, the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia were fresh on her mind, as Jelinek explains: ‘[In *Sports Play*] I associate the metaphor of sport with war. The unrest in the former Yugoslavia, after all, started with a football match that then became charged in nationalist ways and ended in violence. This was the game on May 13, 1990, between the Croatian club Dinamo Zagreb and the Serbian side Red Star Belgrade at Maksimir Stadium [in the Croatian capital]’.¹⁰ This real historical scene may have served as a model for Jelinek’s proposal that the stage could be divided into two spheres separated by a mesh fence that separates the two sets of fans from

¹⁰ Jelinek, in Simon Stephens, ‘Elfriede Jelinek: Game on’.

each other to keep them off each other's throats: 'Die beiden Mengen sind die Feindmengen, von ihren Übergriffen handelt im Grunde das ganze Stück, vielleicht aber auch von was ganz anderem' (p. 8) ['The two crowds are the enemy masses, whose attacks on each other are what the play is about, or maybe it is about something else', p. 39]. The latter lapidary qualifier already hints that the play is about to open out into other conflicts, topics and spaces of *agon* that intersect with those of the sporting arena.

The appearance of Elfi Elektra, a hybrid figure merging a fictional version of the author with Sophocles' tragic protagonist who camps outside the palace to seek revenge for the murder of her father, introduces the space of representation of ancient Greek theatre and its tragic conflicts and at the same time the topic of historical remembrance. Her meandering and associative opening speech soon turns from the above sporting arena to the fields of buried war dead and present warmongers: 'Unter der Erde liegen sie dicht beisammen. Ja, manche, die heute noch Kriege führen, gehen sogar soweit, den eng aneinandergeschmiegtten ehemaligen Feinden noch immer Feindseligkeit zuzuschreiben, nur damit man selbst den Toten noch drohen kann' (p.10) ['Underneath the earth they lie close together. In fact some of those still waging war today go so far as to say that their one-time enemies, snuggled up tight, are still hostile, so that they can continue to threaten even the dead', p. 41]). This and other passages draw on the intertext of Elias Canetti's *Masse und Macht* [translated as *Crowds and Power*], in which he analyses how crowds establish their mass identity in opposition to a second crowd: the living versus the dead, men versus women, friend versus foe.¹¹

Furthermore, Elfi Elektra's speech evokes an ongoing battle with fellow Austrians ('Ich trete niemandem mehr entgegen, schon gar nicht meinen Nachbarn in Österreich' (p.12) [I don't oppose anyone anymore, least of all my neighbours in Austria, p. 43]), alluding to the

¹¹ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carol Stewart (Middlesex/, 1981 [1962]).

concerted hate campaign that brandished the author as a ‘Netzbeschmutzerin’ [a bird that fouls its own nest], a denigrator of her native Austria for persistently calling attention to its Nazi past and continued rightwing populism. As Ulrike Haß notes, such ‘mass media led hate campaigns in which spectators and news receivers form “communities of excitability” (Sloterdijk) around the case of individual brandished and persecuted persons’ have their model in ‘the form of the Roman arena [...] with its principles of contests and show fights, the fierce confrontation to the bloody end, the lynching crowd and the aggressive discharge’.¹² As an unwilling ‘gladiator’, the framing figure of Elfi Elektra is both drawn into the arena and on the margins of it as a keen observer of its dynamics.

Elfi Elektra opens up the theatrical *agon* as assembly by addressing the audience: ‘Sagen Sie, ist das alles auch genügend bewacht? Tote, raus! Lebende rein! Ach, die sind schon drinnen? Na umso besser, dann können wir ja die Türen wieder schließen mit unserem Pneuma’ (p. 12-13) [‘Tell me, is everything being guarded properly? Out with the dead, in with the living! Oh, they’re already in? All the better, now we can close the doors with our life-bestowing spirit again’, p. 43]. Her opening monologue effectively sets the scene for the intersections of agonal spheres in the play as a whole. From the outset, Jelinek here associates the metaphors, values and rituals of sports with those of war. Rather than regarding sports as a civilising force, she presents sport, as Allyson Fiddler argues, as an ‘embodiment of war in peacetime and, ultimately, a symptom of proto-fascist enthusiasm for the strong, healthy body and condemnation of the weak and the sick’.¹³ Furthermore, Jelinek sees sport as a potential physical and mental training ground for future real wars, which becomes clear in the subsequent scene between the Woman who laments the loss of her son to sports and the Chorus who responds to her: ‘Wie wollen Sie einem jungen Mann klarmachen, daß er in den

¹² Ulrike Haß, ‘Ein Sportstück’, *Jelinek Handbuch*, ed. by Pia Janke (Stuttgart, 2013), pp. 162-67 (p. 162).

¹³ Allyson Fiddler, ‘Theorizing and “Playing” Sport in Elfriede Jelinek: Some Notes on *Ein Sportstück*’, in *From Perinet to Jelinek: Viennese Theatre in its Political and Intellectual Context*, ed. by W.E. Yates, Allyson Fiddler and John Warren (Oxford, 2001), pp. 271-81 (p. 274).

Krieg ziehen soll, wenn er vorher keinen Sport getrieben hat? Ihr Sohn ist nötig!' (p. 25) [‘How do you make it clear to a young man that he has to go to war if he’s not done any sport before? Your son is vital!’, p. 51]. There is thus for Jelinek a dangerous *continuum* between the ostensibly noble *agon* of sports, on the one hand, and the violent conflict of war on the other.

Furthermore, in the figure of Andi, based on the Styrian body builder Andreas Münzer, who trained and modelled his body on his role model Arnold Schwarzenegger, the play thematizes another distinctly modern area of sports, namely that of the ‘biochemical reality’ of the body.¹⁴ Here the body of the athlete, prompted by the expectations of an overbearing über-mother and idolized body images of the media, becomes the site of the *agon* and agony of an invisible biochemical warfare through doping: ‘Leber aufgelöst, Nieren hin, Muskeln noch da, doch darunter ist alles flüssig. Überflüssig! Mama!’ (p. 97) [‘Liver dissolved, kidneys gone, the muscles still there, but underneath everything is liquid. Liquified! Mama!’, p. 98].

Another ‘interlude’ crosses the ancient Greek heroes Achilles and Hector with modern sports officials. While these appear under the guise of ancient Greek protagonists, Jelinek’s figures generally are not *dramatic* protagonists and antagonists but *post*-protagonistic figures, as Christina Schmidt rightly stresses.¹⁵ They are not characters entering into dialogue with one another but more like structural figures speaking in endless monologues that are traversed by several voices. Even Achilles and Hector who are seemingly having a dialogue while playing tennis, are only ‘ironic memories of the protagonistic principle’,¹⁶ and are in fact spouting monologues at each other without entering a debate or actually responding to each other. Their defamiliarising self-analysis, their names and sudden meta-dramatic questions, like ‘Wann haben wir noch gleich gelebt?’ [translated as ‘What century are we in again?’, p. 118]

¹⁴ Haß, ‘Ein Sportstück’, p. 164.

¹⁵ Christina Schmidt, *Tragödie als Bühnenform. Einar Schleeßs Chor-Theater* (Bielefeld, 2010), pp. 41-44.

¹⁶ Schmidt, *Tragödie als Bühnenform*, p. 52.

mark them as quoted figures from another age, resurfacing here as interchangeable sports officials in a global corporate economy of ‘forced membership’ (p. 117). These figures are at best place-holders for individuals but more often than not ‘text-bearers’ where different discourses intersect.

Jelinek can thus be said to explore the possibilities of *agon* and tragic conflict in a post-individualistic age and within a post-dramatic (or no longer dramatic) form of playwriting. Unlike *Wolken. Heim.* [Clouds.Home., 1988] and later texts such as *Bambiland* (2003) or the recent *Die Schutzbefohlenen* [The Wards, 2013], this play does have designated speakers, but these are often ambivalent and in the longest section of the play disintegrate into the generic ‘sportsman’, ‘another sportsman’, ‘another’, ‘a second’, ‘a third’ and so on, so that speakers become entirely interchangeable. Crucially Jelinek’s ‘post-protagonistic figure designs’¹⁷ are further combined with the explicit demand for a chorus. While Jelinek’s play contains only one explicitly designated Chorus towards the beginning of the play, the hybrid design and polyphonic speech of her other figures, as well as the above mentioned interchangeability of speakers in the long sections about sportsmen lend themselves to the use of multiple choruses in performance above and beyond the designated Chorus.

IV.

Einar Schleef’s premiere of *Ein Sportstück* at the Burgtheater took up Jelinek’s challenge in a radical and extreme way, staging the play with 113 performers (singers, actors and extras) plus 29 children who at one point simply played football on stage. The ‘short version’ for the premiere on the 23 January 1998 lasted 5 hours, the long version 7 hours. Schleef followed Jelinek’s stage direction by deploying choruses of various sizes in multiple ways. In doing so he not only presented the sections designated as ‘Chorus’ in Jelinek’s text as such but also turned the figures of ‘Täter’ [‘Perpetrator’], ‘Sportler’ [‘Sportsman’] and ‘Taucher’ [‘Diver’],

¹⁷ Schmidt, *Tragödie als Bühnenform*, p. 44.

as well as 'Elfi Elektra' into chorus groups of various sizes. Singing, chanting rhythmically and at times stomping, the choruses often assumed, as Wolfgang Behrens states, 'a massive presence on stage [...] against which single figures and individuals could assert themselves only through the greatest physical, vocal or authoritarian exertion'.¹⁸

Schleef's pioneering choric approach as a director was closely connected to his own key theoretical concerns developed in his book *Droge Faust Parsifal*, namely those of a 'return of tragic consciousness' and a 'return of woman into the central conflict'.¹⁹ According to Schleef's theory, Shakespeare had destroyed the Ancient chorus, splitting it into individuals – resulting in a gain for actors but 'a significant loss in content that no protagonist can make up for'²⁰ –, while German classical dramatists such as Goethe and Schiller adopted a mixed form, partly building on Shakespeare's innovations but refusing to turn down ancient tragic form altogether and therefore retaining a (weakened) chorus.²¹ Schleef wanted to resurrect not just the role of the Ancient chorus for contemporary theatre, but, with recourse to Ancient tragedy, to 'correct' a development in German drama where woman had been driven out of the centre of the conflict.

This latter concern is shared by Jelinek's play where the female figures 'Elfi Elektra' and 'Young Woman', who is associated both with Kleist's Penthesilea and with Cassandra, are central figures – albeit not in a dramatic way but in a meta- and postdramatic way: Elfi Elektra as a framing figure for the whole play and Young Woman as a figure within her own play within a play. The other central figure of Woman, the mother who feels deprived of her son after sending him 'in den Krieg des Sports' (p. 22) ['to the sports war', p. 49], is not explicitly associated with Greek tragic figures but may well have been inspired by Schleef's

¹⁸ Wolfgang Behrens, 'Einar Gott: Wie Elfriede Jelinek ihre Position der Schwäche an der Figur Einar Schleefs stärkt', in *Text und Kritik*, 117, Neufassung (2007), pp. 41–47 (p. 42).

¹⁹ Einar Schleef, *Droge Faust Parsifal* (Frankfurt a. M., 1997), p. 10.

²⁰ Schleef, *Droge Faust Parsifal*, p. 11.

²¹ Schleef, *Droge Faust Parsifal*, pp. 14–16.

own choric adaptation *Die Mütter* which merged Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* and Euripides' *The Suppliants* and featured a chorus of wailing women lamenting the loss of their sons to war.²²

Schleef stages the Woman in *Ein Sportstück* as a lonely figure in mourning who addresses the audience with a vocal vehemence that visibly shakes the body of the actress. After her first monologue and upon her 'ready, steady, go' a 50-strong chorus runs up to the ramp and starts to chorically speak, sing and shout the monologue that is addressing the mother into the audience. This curious constellation often used by Schleef, whereby both parties of an agonistic debate face the audience, creates a 'space of confrontation' that works against the passive consumption encouraged by the bourgeois 'Guckkastenbühne' [picture stage], as Hans-Thies Lehmann argues: 'The space becomes "activated" [...], the spectator feels involved because the physical and intellectual confrontation is repeatedly made conscious, the theatre situation does not remain subconscious as an irrelevant frame'.²³ The audience is in this case closely confronted both with the Woman's vehement lament and with the Chorus' polyvocally scolding address to her and thus experiences the strange *agon* of different positions directly in a dialectical way.

Apart from the conflict between the Woman and the Chorus, the more general conflict between the individual and the chorus as a group or crowd is of concern to both Jelinek and Schleef, Jelinek here being strongly influenced in her writing of the play by Canetti's *Masse und Macht*, as well as by Herbert Jäger's *Makrokriminalität*,²⁴ a source that is explicitly acknowledged in the original Rowohlt version. This conflict is not a matter of simple opposition of individual and group, however. Rather, as Lehmann explains Schleef's theory, there is an interdependence: on the one hand, '[t]he "normal relation" of every individual to

²² Einar Schleef's and Ulrich Müller-Schwerte's *Die Mütter* premiered at the Frankfurter Schauspiel in 1986.

²³ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Das Politische Schreiben* (Berlin, 2002), p. 189.

²⁴ Herbert Jäger, *Makrokriminalität: Studien zur Kriminologie kollektiver Gewalt* (Frankfurt a. M., 1989).

the chorus is that of “belonging” – and specifically – and this is what is important – desired or suffered belonging’; on the other hand – and this creates an interesting theatrical ‘agonal dynamic’ – for the chorus the individual is always considered an outcast.²⁵ The chorus, in turn, is itself threatened in its identity by the individual, who is alien to it and does not want to belong.²⁶ This means that both the individual and the chorus are never whole and complete but both are split and compromised by the other – both exist in a relation of perpetual interdependence.

In *Ein Sportstück*, Schleef’s choric form articulated this conflict between individual and group in a physicalized and ritualistic way. This was especially true for the famous ‘Sportlerszene’ [sportsmen scene], Schleef’s condensed choric treatment of the long sequence of interchangeable sportsmen speaking monologues about belonging to a group, club or nation, in which a large chorus in uniform sports dress kept up a ‘fight choreography’ for thirty-five minutes to the beat of eight, transferring a palpable physical energy to the audience. Taking turns, ‘*tutti, solo*’ and repeating the fragments of text in smaller and larger groups, the chorus turned the text into ‘a sort of epic rap’ while relentlessly continuing the strenuous choreography.²⁷ As a result of this durational exercise regime the real fatigue of the sweaty actors at the end of this performance marathon let the chorus fall apart into individual voices, so that, according to Tigges, ‘a fractured (performative) polyphony could be experienced, which lent a voice to Jelinek’s “undead” and “bodyless” bodies’.²⁸ At such moments the interdependence of chorus and individual became acutely audible as well as visible.

²⁵ Lehmann, *Das Politische Schreiben*, p. 200-201.

²⁶ Lehmann, *Das Politische Schreiben*, p. 201.

²⁷ Roberta Cortese, ‘Schleef’s *Sportstück*-Inszenierung – Ein Probenbericht’, in *Elfriede Jelinek: “ICH WILL KEIN THEATER”*, pp. 128-130 (p. 128).

²⁸ Stefan Tigges, ‘TheaterSport. Einar Schleef bewegt Elfriede Jelinek. Zum Verhältnis von Bild, Raum und Sprache’, in *Elfriede Jelinek – Stücke für oder gegen das Theater?*, ed. by Inge Arteel und Heidy Margrit Müller (Brussels, 2008), pp. 131-142 (p. 138),.



Elfriede Jelinek's *Ein Sportstück*, directed by Einar Schleef, Burgtheater 1998.

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It is at such moments that the bodies also begin to approach *agon* as physical struggle and *agony*, in a shift away from the classical *agon* that is typical for much postdramatic theatre, as Lehmann notes: 'The dramatic process occurred *between* the bodies; the postdramatic process occurs *with/on/to* the body. While the dramatic body was the carrier of the *agon*, the postdramatic body offers the image of its *agony*'.²⁹ In Schleef's production of *Ein Sportstück* such moments of *agony* often speak of the individual's struggle between belonging and individuation. Not least of all Einar Schleef's own appearance in the final monologue of the 'Author' (in one performance together with Jelinek herself) could be considered in this context of exhibited *agony*. Schleef, who was a severe stutterer, walked across the vast stage covered entirely by a large cloth onto which Jelinek's monologue of the Author had been

²⁹ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London, 2006), p. 163.

printed. Thus confronted with the monumental demand of Jelinek's writing he shouted out the text, audibly struggling to articulate it. The *agon* of the performer with language and with his or her body is as much part of Schlee's dramaturgy as the *agon* between the individual and the chorus in his overall approach of a theatre of conflict.

Central not only to Jelinek's play but also to Schlee's theoretical approach is the position of Elektra within tragedy. Schlee considers the (self-)expulsion of Sophocles' Elektra 'the first female individualisation in theatre'.³⁰ Her spatial position 'outside the palace' is the 'ancient constellation [...], the prerequisite for the process of individualisation, the sign for the sacrifice about to happen, the sign for the divisiveness of the figures, of humans amongst themselves'.³¹ As such Elektra's position outside the palace is also a metaphor for political dissent. Schlee goes on to call Elektra the 'interruption of the central perspective', by which he points to the spatial order that is symbolic of fascist power, exemplified for instance in Leni Riefenstahl's film of the 1934 Nazi Party Congress, *Triumph of the Will*.³²

It is no coincidence that *Triumph of the Will* not only features in a pun in Elfi Elektra's monologue (p.13/p.43) but that Riefenstahl's fascist aesthetics with its central perspective is also a clear visual reference in Schlee's scenography. In contrast to the Riefenstahl-inspired visual dominance of the 'Sportlerchor', Schlee's Elfi Elektra scene towards the end of the performance is staged with a notably absent chorus, as the all-female Elfi Elektra chorus can only be heard singing from backstage while the chorus of the sailors (referencing Elektra's brother) can be seen saluting the backstage. Elfi Elektra's place 'outside the palace' is thus marked as a precarious, fragile non-place. According to Schmidt, '[a]s a polyphonic figure of lament Elfi Elektra is not linked to her appearance on the visible scene and procures herself

³⁰ Schlee, *Droge Faust Parsifal*, p. 266.

³¹ Schlee, *Droge Faust Parsifal*, p. 265.

³² Schlee, *Droge Faust Parsifal*, p. 266. Schlee analyses *Triumph of the Will* and its manipulation of Ancient Greek visual tropes on pp. 270-272 in his chapter titled 'Elektra'.

an auditorium as a chorus'.³³ In what amounts to a 'politics of perception',³⁴ the audience are notably challenged to listen carefully to a chorus of marginalised voices.

V.

While on the level of the play's content, Jelinek charts the dark side of society's valorisation of sportive *agon* and its descent into collective violence and warfare, on the level of theatrical communication, the explicit references to Greek tragedy in the play take recourse to a culture and tradition where the performed *agon* in theatre is part of publicly exhibited dissent – and by extension part of the democratic culture of the political community of the polis.³⁵ As I have shown, the figure of Elfi Elektra with her place 'outside the palace' can especially serve to make the case that Jelinek's play engages in an artistic practice of democratic dissent, speaking up against a culture that valorizes the fit, sporty and aggressive while marginalising the weak, the ill and also the intellectual. As regards the *agon* as a judicial practice, Elfi Elektra also stands paradigmatically for the agonist who is the advocate of the murdered, the wronged and the persecuted. As the father-less daughter who refuses to forget his murder, her speaking embodies historical memory.³⁶ This figure resurfaces in that of the fictional 'Autorin' [Author] who, it is stipulated, 'can also be represented by Elfi Elektra' (p. 157). In an intertextual inversion of Sylvia Plath's poem 'Daddy', in which Plath compares her father to a fascist, the final speech of the Author addresses the fate of her father as a victim of anti-Semitism. 'Sie haben schon längst Schweigen geboten', the Author says, 'und ich will immer noch, daß mich alle hören sollen' (p. 187) ['They have wanted to silence me for some time now, but what I still want is for everyone to listen', p. 160]. Schleef's theatre of conflict, his alternating of aggressive and highly present choruses with faintly heard and invisible

³³ Schmidt, *Tragödie als Bühnenform*, p. 99.

³⁴ See Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, pp. 184-186.

³⁵ See Barker, *Entering the Agon*.

³⁶ Ulrike Haß makes the point that Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Elektra, an important intertext for *Ein Sportstück*, 'stellt die Figur des Nichtvergessens in das Zentrum' ['places the figure of non-forgetting at the centre']. Haß, 'Ein Sportstück', p. 166.

individual or choric voices – the latter sometimes in almost complete darkness – physicalises and spatialises the precariousness of dissent and engages in a form of embodied agonistics.

In many ways Schleef's production was very much anchored within an Austrian and German historical context and more specifically within the history of Vienna's Burgtheater. Schleef, who criticized Jelinek for prohibiting performances of her plays in Austria, arguing that it was only here that she had her audience,³⁷ used the Burgtheater in what could be described as a site-specific way. Thus, his performance opened not with Elfi Elektra's opening monologue, which he cut, hoping to be able to use it for a later production of Jelinek's *Macht Nichts*,³⁸ but instead with a prologue consisting of a speech originally given in 1888 on the occasion of the inauguration of the Burgtheater; the speech was read by the oldest actor in the Burgtheater ensemble, Heinz Fröhlich, and a small choir of four children. After the Woman's speech, this was followed by the chorus singing the hymn 'Lied des Kaisers', the old hymn of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Both opening gestures anchor the play in the nationalist history of Austria – implicitly linking its militaristic culture to Jelinek's connection between the warrior and the sportsman. Moreover, the 'long version' contained larger-than-life projections of film sequences, silent enactments from Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, such as the murder of Clytemnestra, that were filmed on location in the Burgtheater, in the cellar and in subterranean corridors, on the historical grand staircase and in the attic.³⁹ All of this extended the production in a site-specific way and made full use of Schleef's 'home advantage'. The Burgtheater became a 'palace' from the moment when, as dramaturg Rita Thiele reports, a young actress playing a homeless woman 'alias Elektra' greeted the audience on the steps

³⁷ Elfriede Jelinek, 'Einar Schleef', available on Jelinek's homepage, <<http://www.elfriedejelinek.com/>> [accessed 15 July 2014].

³⁸ Tragically Schleef did not get to finish his production of *Macht Nichts* at the Berliner Ensemble due to a heart attack. He died on the 21 July 2001 at the age of 57.

³⁹ Cortese, 'Schleefs *Sportstück*-Inszenierung', p. 128.

outside the entrance.⁴⁰ Schleeß's use of the Burgtheater can be read as fostering an 'agonistic public space' in which the audience can reflect on the history of this dominant institution (as famously articulated in Jelinek's play *Burgtheater*) and which can 'contribute to unsettling the dominant hegemony'.⁴¹

VI.

Schleeß's monumental original production has perhaps understandably overshadowed the production history of the play, as few directors, daunted by his success, have since dared to take on the play for fear of not living up to his production.⁴² Yet this is an attitude that seems to replace the slavish faithfulness to the author's text – which directors have over the years freed themselves from – with timid reverence for a particular staging and performance text. While Schleeß's directorial approach will always stand out as unique and incomparable, Jelinek's instruction to 'Do what you like' should also be considered a liberating exhortation to come up with new stagings for new contexts.

For reasons of its particular 'site-specificity' alone, it is doubtful that Schleeß's performance would have translated easily to other contexts and cultures. Moreover, when considering cultural translatability we may need to consider different theatre histories and traditions. As outlined above, Schleeß's production was tied to a very specific agenda concerning the resurrection of the chorus and of tragic consciousness by reconnecting with the history not only of ancient Greek theatre but also of classical German drama. Thus he inserted whole scenes from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* and Heinrich von Kleist's *Penthesilea* – both German neo-classical tragedies that are referenced in Jelinek's text – in order to strengthen

⁴⁰ Rieta Thiele, 'Sportstück', in *Einar Schleeß Arbeitsbuch*, ed. by Gabriele Gerecke, Harald Müller und Hans-Ulrich Müller-Schwerte (Berlin, 2002), p.

⁴¹ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, p. 91.

⁴² Anecdotally, one dramaturg working in Britain told me he would never touch the play with a barge pole because no staging could ever live up to Schleeß's premiere. Recent productions in Germany have included Martin Stieffermann's staging at the Oldenburgisches Staatstheater in 2004 and Hermann Schmidt-Rahmer's staging at the Nürnberger Schauspielhaus in 2012.

the tragic conflict of the sexes present in the play and further help to return the woman to the centre of the conflict. His directorial approach, as we have seen, places a strong emphasis on the play's underpinning connection with the Greek tragic *agon* and its continued or renewed relevance in a postmodern and postdramatic age. In doing so, however, there are also inevitable losses: the production in my view underplays the play's contemporary references. There is little sense of the context of a mediatized society, for example, or of the manufacture and consumption of sports in a global age. Finally, Schleef's quasi-Wagnerian formal canon at times leaves little room for discovering the humour and subtlety of the text.

Just a Must's production of the English language premiere of *Sports Play*, directed by Vanda Butkovic, was a much more modest affair than Schleef's monumental 'home game' at the Burgtheater.⁴³ Intent on introducing Jelinek's unique voice as a playwright who had hardly been represented on British stages, the production opened with Elfi Elektra's opening lines being heard in a recording by Jelinek herself in the original German while the actress playing Elfi Elektra (Denise Heinrich Lane), donning an iconic Jelinek wig, stood by listening before gradually taking over in English. Thus the production self-consciously marked itself as a translation while concurrently introducing Jelinek's post-protagonistic game of substitutions. Whereas Schleef had cut Elfi Elektra's opening monologue, in this production this figure gains additional weight by being present on stage throughout, observing from the sidelines and occasionally stepping into the action, for example in order to lend a voice to the Victim by giving him a microphone (see cover image of this volume).

The scenography by Simon Donger was deliberately abstract and open to a multiplicity of readings. The set consisted of 140 kilos of white polyester toy stuffing, which the company

⁴³ Reviewer Andrew Haydon called the production 'much more a bite-sized, intelligent chamber piece than some intimidating monolith of regietheater-gone-mad' – although this seems an unfair description of Schleef's production. See Andrew Haydon, 'Sports Play – Nuffield Theatre, Lancaster', *Postcards from the Gods*, 17 July 2012, <<http://postcardsgods.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/sports-play-nuffield-theatre-lancaster.html>> [accessed 15 July 2014].

nicknamed the ‘fluff’. Depending on its use, arrangement and context in performance, it created associations with the different ‘fields’ or sites of *agon* that I discussed earlier: from the sports field and the battlefield to the biochemical reality of artificially enhanced bodies (during Andy’s monologue, the performers stuffed their costumes with the fluff to create grotesquely built bodies). On another level, the synthetic toy stuffing as such underscored the commercial manufacture of sports events by corporations and the media. As Donger reasons, the choice of an abstract scenography is also grounded in Jelinek’s own use of abstraction:

Jelinek proposes to observe the athletic body as a template entirely dependent upon, if not absorbed by, other bodies, objects, spaces and ideologies. She makes use of abstraction to break figuration’s illusory veils of self-control, prowess and power that are wrapped around sports and its agents. In doing so [...] she suggests looking at the sports event in all its glory of mass entertainment and as a barbaric and primitive form of mass shackling in which power relations are exacerbated up to illicit violent domination and disseminated as such within other realms of everyday life.⁴⁴

Moreover, the fluff not only served to underscore the destabilisation of protagonistic figuration and to support polysemic readings but also acted as a real resistant material for the performers: ‘Though it is a soft, clean and playful substance, the large quantity of fluff becomes an obstacle to bodily movement as it impedes ways of walking, raises the environment’s temperature and stifles the aural of the performers’.⁴⁵ As such, it became part of a general dramaturgical principle of ‘performing under duress’: performers had to speak Jelinek’s difficult linguistic gymnastics while doing a Jane Fonda-inspired workout (Young Woman), while stuck in a headlock (Victim) or while being buried under fluff (Andy

⁴⁴ Simon Donger, ‘To Set and Not To Set: Destabilizing abstraction in scenography’, *Performance Research*, 18.3 (2013), pp. 154-160 (p. 157).

⁴⁵ Donger, ‘To Set and Not to Set’, p. 158.

– see below), and they struggled to make their voices heard against a stomping bullying crowd.



Elfriede Jelinek's *Sports Play*, directed by Vanda Butkovic 2012.

Photo: Ian Hughes, with kind permission by Just a Must

In addition to playing individual roles, all but the Elfi Elektra actress also acted as the Chorus, who changed from 'team' to 'crowd' to the Lacanian 'big Other' of society, underscoring the text's own semantic leaps from the micro-politics of a group to the macro-politics of a nation. Despite working with a much smaller chorus than Schleef had at his disposal, in Butkovic's production, too, the interdependence between chorus/group and individual was physically and vocally communicated. Choric forms of theatre are rarely seen on British stages – perhaps due to Shakespeare's purging of the chorus, as Schleef might argue – and the impact of even a small chorus confronting the audience for long stretches with Jelinek's text treated in a musical way and spoken in rhythmic unison was therefore felt quite strongly.



Elfriede Jelinek's *Sports Play*, directed by Vanda Butkovic 2012.

Photo: Ian Hughes, with kind permission by Just a Must.

As this was a touring production that premiered in Lancaster during the 2012 UEFA European Championship and ended in London to coincide with the Olympics, the play tended to resonate differently with audiences at different moments of the tour. Towards the beginning of the production, the monologues of victims and perpetrators, and comparisons between sports and war resonated strongly with the violent clashes between Polish and Russian supporters during Euro 2012. In London, the euphoric hype surrounding the sporting event almost threatened to drown out Jelinek's dissenting voice. Nevertheless I would say that in this context the scenes that resonated most strongly with criticism surrounding London 2012 were those that implicitly thematised the corporatisation of sports and of the Olympics in particular. The scenes between Achilles and Hector, for example, which in Butkovic's production were turned into a recurring double act of the two managerial prototypes engaging in ever new sports – tennis, golf, scuba diving – ironically highlighted our distance from the old *agon* of heroic protagonists. Despite their names, Achilles and Hector, Jelinek's figures are no longer individual heroic leaders but interchangeable sports or business functionaries

who are part of the ‘members’ club’ of global corporate capitalism: ‘Die Zwangsgliedschaft bedeutet, daß die einen für uns, die anderen gegen uns bankrott gehen dürfen’ (p. 128) [‘compulsory membership means that some are permitted to go bankrupt for us, others against us’, p. 120]. In scenes such as this, the play charts the dissolution of the old *agon* under conditions of neo-liberalist capitalism. At the same time, on the level of theatrical communication, the play holds on to a model of agonistics as a form of artistic dissent, even while it self-reflectively comments on the potential hopelessness of this endeavour because theatre itself is not exempt from the commodification that the sports functionaries represent, as when Achilles says: ‘Sie, Frau Autor, warum sind Sie denn so aggressive? [...] Was plustern Sie sich denn dermaßen auf? Am liebsten gehn ja doch wir ins Theater. Und uns interessiert nicht was Sie sagen’ (p.130) [‘And you, Madame Author, why are you so aggressive? [...] Why are you getting so worked up? We adore going to the theatre, we’re just not interested in what you have to say’ (p. 121)]. In the event, Jelinek’s dissenting voice as a playwright did make itself heard in Britain even amidst the hype of the Olympics, especially when Just a Must were eventually invited by the Cultural Olympiad to stage a six hour ‘marathon reading’ of the entire text at the Soho Theatre in London.⁴⁶ If nothing else, Just a Must’s production proved that the play has the potential to engage powerfully in ‘agonistics’ beyond its original ‘home arena’ of Austria and the Burgtheater.

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⁴⁶ See Karen Jürs-Munby, ‘Performing Sports Play’, *Exeunt Magazine*, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/jelineks-sports-play-in-different-arenas/> [accessed 15 July 2014]. Since its tour in the United Kingdom the play has toured to Macedonia and Algeria.